DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 595 CS 216 115

AUTHOR	Desser, Daphne
TITLE	Letters from Czarist Russia: Rhetoric as Political Action.
PUB DATE	1997-03-00
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ethnicity; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Letters (Correspondence); *Multicultural Education; Student Attitudes; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS	*Dialogic Communication; *Diversity Concept; Historical Background; Russia

ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism has emphasized the difficulty in valuing "unity" given diversities of gender, class, culture, and ethnicity, and has illustrated how a desire for unity can function to routinize and standardize the teaching of writing into an object of safe consumption. Writing teachers should be wary of asking students to identify themselves in rigid and static ways--this kind of narrow positioning makes dialogic communication more difficult. A dialogic and intersubjective understanding of ethics that is born and maintained through the necessity of response to the other can offer a way out of the problematic ontological obligations associated with identity politics created by multiculturalism's sincere but ultimately monologizing call for "diversity." Letters dating from 1924-1927, written by a Russian Zionist grandfather, Mordecai Ben-Ami, a writer and journalist, illustrate some of the dangers and difficulties of adhering too rigidly to multicultural identification. Ben-Ami's letters reveal his own easy dismissal of cultural and ethnic others, despite having experienced ethnic persecution himself. Passages from the letters exemplify how a strict allegiance to cultural and ethnic identity, although seemingly powerful, can be ultimately disabling. Ethnicities should be perceived not as static or rigid identities, but as forms of identification open to continual reflection, reevaluation, and renegotiation. Teachers of writing are called upon to complicate simplified notions of difference without erasing their existence; finding ways to teach students to value face to face dialogic encounters with the cultural and ethnic other as a means to ethical response would be better. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 414 595

Daphne Desser
University of Arizona
English Department
Tucson, AZ 85712
ddesser@u.arizona.edu
1997 CCCC Presentation
March 12-15, Phoenix, AZ

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D Desser
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Letters from Czarist Russia: Rhetoric as Political Action

I'm speaking before you today because I no longer believe in what multiculturalism once proposed to offer. Multiculturalism has emphasized the difficulty in valuing "unity" given diversities of gender, class, culture and ethnicity, and has illustrated how a desire for unity can function to routinize and standardize the teaching of writing into an object of safe consumption. It has also contributed to the common current practice of identifying ourselves according to static ethnic or cultural categories. I believe that such positionings have not created the "unity" in diversity we hoped for, and have led, at times, to calcification in identity construction where, instead, fluidity is called for. "Unity in diversity" is what the "promised land" of multiculturalism has failed to deliver. As teachers of writing, we need to be wary of asking our students to identify themselves in rigid and static ways because this kind of narrow positioning makes dialogic communication more difficult.

In response to calcified constructions of ethnicity and identity, we now speak of postmodern perspectives on the self, ones that acknowledge our shifting, temporal, competing "selves" as responses to the bewildering specificity of social contexts and "the other". I do not hold that these postmodern perspectives on the self lead to the conclusion that "we are living in a world where discreet cultures and identities no longer exist"-- a statement proposed by this session's call for papers. Rather, I believe that

CS 216 115

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

postmodernism, by emphasizing specificity and spontaneity over the totalitizing effect of general ethical rules, can offer us ways to encourage our students' ethical dialogue with the other. In other words, I would like to emphasize identity construction as an ongoing, contextually negotiated process. As Richard Miller has pointed out, we can not leave our students with their first impressions of a text that they perceive as representing the "other". Miller suggests incorporating self-reflexivity in writing responses to these texts. I would emphasize further that revisited responses to the other in written texts are part of this continual negotiation of identity and need to be presented to our students as such.

A postmodern ethics of response (as posited by Nealon in his work on Bakhtin and Levinas)-- that is, a dialogic and intersubjective understanding of ethics that is born and maintained through the necessity of response to the other-- can offer us a way out of the problematic ontological obligations associated with identity politics created by multiculturalism's sincere but ultimately monologizing call for "diversity".

When I speak of the dangers of monologizing calls, I am not standing on purely theoretical ground. I come from a family who has weathered the terrible consequences of the failure to admit, value, or see the other. I am currently in the process of translating 226 letters written in French by my great-grandfather Mordecai Ben-Ami. My great-grandfather was a Russian Zionist, fiction writer, and journalist who lived and wrote as a Jewish person during a time of severe Russian persecution of ethnic difference. My grandmother gave his private letters to me; they date from 1924-1927 and were sent from Milan, Berlin, Geneva, Chaifa and Odessa.

In the remainder of this presentation, I will analyze selected passages from my great-grandfather's private correspondence to argue that the letters illustrate some of the

difficulties and dangers of adhering too rigidly to multicultural identification. First, I detail how the letters did not pose a static moment of response from me, but rather created shifting moments of identification, non- and re-identification. Second, I discuss how Ben-Ami's letters reveal his own easy dismissal of cultural and ethnic others despite having experienced ethnic persecution himself. Thus I shall argue that passages from my great-grandfather's letters exemplify how a strict allegiance to cultural and ethnic identity, although seemingly powerful, can be ultimately disabling. I will argue instead for perceiving ethnicities not as static or rigid identities, but as forms of identification that are open to continual reflection, reevaluation, and renegotiation.

The work of translation slows down the usual process of identifying with the writer because the translator must wait longer for the meaning of the text to emerge. This drawn-out process intensified moments of strong identification as the semantic meaning of my great-grandfather's words slowly manifested themselves to me. One of the more exciting of such moments occurred while I translated the following description of my great-grandfather visit to Jerusalem in 1924:

> You are surprised naturally that I never speak about the quite precious antiquities of which Jerusalem is so rich. Yes, Jerusalem is the richest in the world in memories and monuments to the past and the poorest and the most miserable in its present. And when I view that which recalls this enormous past, I can not help but sob, I do not know why… (Letter 9)

When I read these words, they immediately called to mind descriptions of my own visit to Jerusalem in 1995. In my journal I found an entry about my visit to the Wailing Wall, my great-grandfather's words uncannily resembling my own; in some cases our phrasing and choice of words are identical. I was able, as a postmodern agnostic twentieth-century American, to overlook the differences between myself and my Orthodox, conservative, and religious great-grandfather--temporarily. In that particular moment, I saw us as two people being mysteriously called in similar ways to remember our origins. Thus, as both a writer and reader, I experienced a moment of strong identification.

As I have hinted, such a strong moment of identification did not occur often for me as I translated my great-grandfather's letters. More often, it was our differences that drew my attention. It is on the moments of particular nonidentification that I would like to focus next. In the same letter that I quoted from earlier, there were also moments in which, as the semantic meaning of Ben-Ami's words became clear to me, I stopped, reread, checked for possible errors, and then had to resign myself to the accuracy of my translation. In these moments, although I was already previously inclined to identify with my great-grandfather, I found myself resisting his language and ideas and wanting to maintain as much possible distance between us. The following passage is taken from the same letter, quoted earlier, marked July 1924 Jerusalem:

> All the slopes and valleys below along the river the Kidron, of which there is not a trace in summer, are covered with numerous tombs, tightly close to one another. Everything surrounding them is so dry, so sinister. And opposite on the right there is an enormous Armenian convent with many rich edifices, a garden, and right

> across from it the mosque of Omar perched below. The most terrible, the most bitter irony. Yes, for us--nothing but the tombs . . .(Letter 13)

Within minutes of experiencing a moment of deep identification with my great-grandfather, I was confronted with a passage I preferred to ignore. At issue here for me were the differences in how my great-grandfather and I prefer to position ourselves, in ethnic and political ways, vis-à-vis the "other." From my twentieth-century postmodern perspective, I read the excerpt above as confirmation of how an ethnic or national allegiance that is too strict can create situations in which oppressed groups prove themselves also incapable of entering into a meaningful dialogue with the "other." My great-grandfather's willingness to dismiss the presence of both convents and mosques in Jerusalem as having little significance beyond a reminder of how little the Jews have in contrast read to me as indication of how ethnic/national loyalty, even when part of a legitimate liberationist agenda, can create moments of misunderstanding and further distance between the oppressed and the oppressor.

I did understand that my great-grandfather, as a Zionist and a Jew, felt he had a legitimate claim on Jerusalem. Given the precarious situation Russian Jews experienced during his lifetime, I could revise what seemed to be unnecessary paranoia to a reasonable amount of fear and distrust for someone who survived the Russian pogroms, and whose distrust of non-Jews became actualized fifteen years later during the Holocaust. And yet, although I knew that as a responsible scholar I was obligated to place my great-grandfather's words in the historical context from which they were taken and

reevaluate them accordingly, the fact remains that I liked my great-grandfather less having had to do so.

It is more clear now perhaps how these shifting moments of identification and nonidentification with my great-grandfather created shifting, complex identity constructions. I have demonstrated, I hope, how these constructions were a negotiation between my great-grandfather and me and the topic that, in a Bakhtinian sense, played a decisive role in the dialogic relationship between author and reader. These identity constructions were varied and variable, unstable and vulnerable to continuous reinterpretation--often many times within a single letter. It quickly became unworkable to speak of a single, coherent identity construction--for myself or for my great-grandfather-- even with concessions to the impact of the various interpretive lenses I employed as a critical reader To complicate matters further, my responses to even the same passage did not remain static. Sometimes passages, to which I initially responded with nonidentification, would upon a second or third reading create moments of identification despite my initial responses. I've termed these instances moments of reidentification. I would like to now address moments of reidentification that occurred as a result of continually revisiting the letters.

In a letter dated Monday August 14, 1911, my great-grandfather writes about a Zionist meeting in Basil to his wife and children:

> It is almost a crime that you are not here, my dear little ones. How unhappy it makes one to not be able to give you such joy, the greatest and most elevated in the world. What a spectacle this meeting at Basil is! One hears here the beating of

> the hearts of our people; one senses the soul and great mind--everywhere, everywhere. It's as if you hear the song of the Hatikvah[1] sounded by more than a million voices . . . (Letter 1)

When I first read this passage, the joy that my great-grandfather describes in this passage and the strong sense of belonging he feels at this Congress were foreign experiences to me. Initially, I read this passage from the perspective of a bemused bystander. However, when I reread this passage after months of research on Zionism and after translating many more of Ben-Ami's letters, I could appreciate in more depth what a triumph this occasion would have been for him. Thus in reading the letters, I was changed, and I was made more vulnerable to being persuaded by my great-grandfather's ethos. Ultimately, I found myself being moved by this passage, having internalized aspects of my great-grandfather's ethos into my own sense of identity.

I hope that in analyzing a few exemplary moments of identification, non- and reidentification that occurred for me as I translated my great-grandfather's thoughts on identity and ethnicity, that I have problematized multiculturalism's easy notions of rigid and static constructs of diversity. As teachers of writing, we are called instead to complicate simplified notions of difference without erasing their existence. We need to find ways to teach our students to value face to face dialogic encounters with the cultural and ethnic other as a means to ethical response. We need to recognize that multiculturalism has, at times, led to an identification that results in sets of monologizing rules which preclude the kind of vulnerability necessary to remain in ethical dialogue.

In conclusion, I would like to add that I have overheard fellow composition instructors bemoan the fact that as a field we have entered this debate at all. "We are teachers of writing", they exclaim, "not experts in identity." It is true, that we may not always feel up to the job. But, to quote Rabbi Hillel, a first century Jewish scholar famous for his maxims, "if not we, then who?"

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail. The Dialogic Imagination. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Holquist. Austin U of Texas Press, 1981.

"Ben-Ammi". Encyclopedia Judaica. Jerusalem: MacMillan, 1971, 462.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. Dialectic of Enlightenment. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum.

Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

Miller, Richard. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." College English. 56.4 (1994): 389-408.

Nealon, Jeffrey T. "The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas." College English. 59.2. (1997): 129-148.

Salmon, Laura. Una Voce dal Deserto: Ben-Ami, Uno Scrittore Dimenticato. Bologna: Univsersita di Bologna, 1995.

Endnotes

[1] The Hatikvah once was a Zionist hymn; it is now the Israeli National anthem.